DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 288 CE 061 304

AUTHOR Witherell, Nancy
TITLE A Volunteer Literacy Program: Problems in Volunteer Tutor Recruitment, Training and Retention.
PUB DATE May 92
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (37th, Orlando, FL, May 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; *Adult Programs; Educational Finance; *Literacy Education; *Problems; Program Improvement; Recruitment; Teacher Persistence; *Tutors; *Volunteers; *Volunteer Training
IDENTIFIERS *Taunton Literacy Corps MA

ABSTRACT

The Taunton, Massachusetts, Literacy Corps (TLC) is a small adult literacy education program run by a part-time director using volunteer tutors. The program has always been hampered by a shortage of funds. There are often long waiting lists for persons needing tutors because funds are inadequate to recruit, train, and manage the number of volunteer tutors who would be needed to serve those seeking tutoring. Volunteer tutors often burn out within a year, frustrated by the slow progress of their pupils or their absenteeism as well as lack of attention from an overworked director. Training classes for current volunteers are often hampered by low attendance or by tutors attending only parts of a series of classes, necessitating quick revisions of lesson plans and lack of coverage of some of the tutors' problems. Some tutors also cause problems by insisting on teaching phonics in lieu of the language experience approach favored by the program or by failing to show up for sessions (although they often have legitimate excuses). Progress could be made with more funding, leading to hiring of support staff, more tutor recruiting, more training classes, and more attention paid to volunteers--enhancing chances of retaining them. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED346288

Paper presented at the
International Reading Association
37th Annual Convention

A Volunteer Literacy Program
Problems in Volunteer Tutor Recruitment, Training and Retention

Submitted by
Nancy Witherell
345 Elm Street
Raynham, MA 02767

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

N Witherell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CE061304

This paper is written to discuss problems current volunteer literacy programs and particularly in the instruction, recruiting and the retention of the volunteer tutors. Community literacy programs that work with volunteer tutors have variety of problems and hopefully through discussion some solutions may evolve. The program discussed in this paper is the Taunton Literacy Corps (TLC). My connection with the TLC is as a volunteer, not working with the learners themselves, but running a series of optional training workshops for the tutors.

The TLC is a relatively small volunteer program in Taunton, Massachusetts, about 30 miles south of Boston and is "funded" by the state of Massachusetts through an agency known as the Commonwealth Literacy Corps. Although the Commonwealth Literacy Corps (CLC) was started by the Dukakis administration in 1988, the Taunton section began in 1989. Through the CLC, money is allocated to various colleges through out the state. The Taunton funding is supplied by the literacy corps located at Bristol Community College in Fall River, Massachusetts approximately 20 miles from Taunton. The director of the Taunton Volunteer program since its beginning has been Connie Turner.

Although the main source of income is from the state, in this particular program it is almost as if the funds are voluntary, too. Dukakis' funding for the CLC is minimal. (The Taunton area is what Dukasis called the "Massachusetts Miracle" during his presidential campaign, and I think he

expected one. (Not to "Shannonize" this paper, but the CLC was started the same year Dukasis ran for president.) When Connie was hired in 1989 as the Taunton area's part-time director, she was given $7,500 as a salary, training manuals, resources and lots of encouragement. Much to her credit, Connie had the experience and expertise to do what was necessary to get the Taunton program off the ground.

First, she made contacts within the community and started the process of asking for donations in every needed area. She was able to receive a free corner of space from another government agency and moved her office from her home, which is located 15 miles away from the target city and began a base office in Taunton. The local library has been extremely helpful in allowing tutors to meet with their learners on Thursday evenings and has given storage space for the small amount of materials owned by TLC. This includes tutor resource books, instructional material, and high interest, low reading ability trade books.

Luckily, Connie was able to get the support of the local newspaper and it frequently runs a hotline literacy advertisement at no cost to the TLC. The editor of the newspaper was instrumental in helping form the Taunton Literacy Council, which consists of high profile members of the community that have the resources and capability to raise funds.

The Taunton Literacy Council was formed one and a half years ago as a nonprofit organization to support the Taunton Literacy Corp. They have committed themselves to raising $8,000 a year. This is for tutor training (Which averages $100 per tutor), instructional materials, monthly telephone expenses and also supplements the director's salary to enable her to work 15 hours a week for fifty weeks.

In January, the director was able to procure a VISTA volunteer from the state office in Boston. This volunteer works for forty hours a week and is enabling a variety of projects to be completed. For instance, the VISTA volunteer was able to catalog the materials in the library, which had been collecting over the past one and a half years.

The learners in the TLC are mostly men. This is a change from two years ago, when mostly women were being tutored. The economic situation in Massachusetts has caused a loss of jobs for many men. Currently, of the 78 learners 60% are male and 40% female. The reading levels differ vastly with the sexes, only two of the male learners read above 5th grade level, while only 3 of the female read below 5th grade level. The average age of the learners is 38. Most of our learners (70%) are unemployed and have come voluntarily to obtain help in reading, math or English.

The student population in the program is recruited in ways similar to other literacy programs. Usually it is referrals from other agencies such as welfare, unemployment Worker's Comp, ABE, the paper advertisement and word of

mouth. Two months ago, this referral method caused an unusual problem. All of a sudden, the program was getting an influx of requests for tutoring. Apparently a social worker from the agency in town was telling welfare recipients that they had to have tutoring in order to continue to receive their benefits. The director had to inform the social worker that because of confidentiality she would not release the names or records of the learners being tutored. That stopped the sudden increase of requests from what would have obviously been reluctant learners.

Some learners are found at the local soup kitchen called "Our Daily Bread", which is sponsored by a church in the area. These learners are tutored by a staff member from Bristol Community College with the aid of volunteer tutors. Most of the learners that come into "Our Daily Bread" have severe social, psychological and financial problems. They are usually living on the street and sleeping in the local shelter. Their attendance is erratic and many seem to be having a continous crisis. Not surprisingly, their lack of skills feeds this crisis and adds to their dilemna.

In our program the recruitment of tutors is done by word of mouth and the advertisements in the town paper. The director runs a training workshop three to four times a year and this is preceded by a recruitment article in the paper.

The beginning training session for tutors is a 15 hour program, and the tutor comes for an additional 3 hours if planning to work with an ESL student. When comparing this

training with a program such as the one run out of Boston University, which pays students to tutor adults, this training is minimal. At Boston University, they start out with 18 hours of training and must attend two hours training each week through out the semester for a total of 112 hours of training. On the other hand, a volunteer program that I interviewed in Belleville, Illinois started with 8 hours of training for their volunteer tutors.

The initial training in the TLC is done in a workshop fashion, and ideas, theories and strategies are explained and modeled. Then the tutors are given a chance to roleplay a learning situation and to practice various lessons. The philosophy behind the TLC instruction is the whole language approach. Language experience stories, sentence writing, journal writing and writing for publication in the literacy magazine are stressed. The tutors are taught that the curriculum, lessons and activities planned are based on the interest and needs of the learner. The tutors are given a work record to be completed monthly and mailed to the director enabling her to oversee the individualized programs.

As previously mentioned, volunteer programs have a variety of problems at the director, tutor and learner levels and the last training session emphasized this fact. Since the VISTA volunteer was helping, the director was able to get information out about the training sessions much earlier than usual. Because of the earlier notice almost

double the usual number of volunteers signed up for training. Therefore for the March training 45 potential volunteers had signed up and the director had assumed that as usual, the majority would attend. We worked together to find a larger area for the training session and were able to use a local church. Only 12 new tutors attended the training.

This has caused a major problem because the waiting list for tutors currently numbers 46. The VISTA volunteer is tutoring six learners and some of our volunteers are tutoring two. Prior to this training we had 65 active tutors. According to the rules of the CLC, our director is limited to 50 volunteers. This apparently is the number the state decided could be handled by one director in approximately 15 hours a week. First consider, the director is getting paid for only 15 hours a week, the VISTA volunteer is working 40 hours a week and approximately 20 of the hours are being used to tutor or prepare for tutoring. Then take into account that between the two of them 35 man hours are going into directing 65 tutors, training another 24, and managing over 100 adult learners at various stages of the program, perhaps Dukakis' "Massachusetts Miracle" is taking place.

To solve the current problem, a second training was held starting in April. The director thought that one night a week training would be more acceptable to tutors than the two nights a week session held in March. The second session

had an attendance of only twelve, also. This was after another write up in the paper and a flyer being put in the bulletin of the host church. Needless to say, this was disappointing considering the number of learners on the waiting list. It has become necessary for the director to match tutors to learners on the bottom of the list instead of at the top. Experience has shown the director that there is more success taking the learner who is most current in recognizing their need. Unfortunately, those potential learners that have had to wait, often lose interest in wanting to learn to read because so much time has elapsed since their initial request.

Another point that needs to be considered is the "burn out" factor of tutors. On the average, volunteer tutors work one year and then quit. This is understandable, since they are putting in an approximately 3-5 hours per week to plan and work with their learner. When this is done over a long period of time, the commitment becomes burdensome.

Other factors that affect tutors in volunteer programs are unwanted frustrations that contribute to the "burn out". One problem involves the isolation of their position. Since the director's position is only funded for 15 hours a week, and since the time required to coordinate the workings of 50 people and act as a program advocate already requires considerably more time than 15 hours a week, that although the director is available for support, the tutors are basically on their own. They often have a hard time dealing

with the slow progress of their learners. They go into the program expecting to work miracles in a year and are disappointed when they feel that all their efforts do not reveal any progress. Another area of frustration for the tutors occurs when they have taken the time to prepare and meet their learner and the learner doesn't show up. Yet another problem arises when the tutor is put by the learner into the uncomfortable situation of having to deal with personal problems. Such problems can be discussed with the director and referrals made, but it is hard for some tutors to not get emotionally involved. The net effect of this and the other adversities just described is that tutor burn-out is inevitable.

Other problems in the volunteer program can be caused by the tutors themselves such as the tutor's use of explicit phonics during their instruction. Most of the learners did not succeed with phonics instruction earlier in life and whole language techniques are stressed during the training session. When volunteers do teach with explicit phonics there is little control over this. One particular problem on using this phonetic approach was from a woman who is influencial in the community. Although the director was straight forward in her request that the tutor teach explicit phonics through context, this suggestion was ignored and the tutor continued to teach as she pleased.

In some ways, a tutor can cause problems for the learner. For instance, sometimes a learner can be upset by

the nonregular attendance of the tutor. Although the situation is different in that the tutor will contact either TLC, or tell the learner in advance (where in the learner's case this advance notice may not be given). This becomes a problem when lessons are cancelled too frequently or if a special project is being worked on and can discourage the learner. One recent example concerns a male learner who wanted to finish an ABC book before his daughter's April birthday. The tutor had been extremely busy and had to cancel out two sessions and the book was not completed on time. This was a big disappointment to the learner and the tutor, too.

As a volunteer in this program, I have found another set of problems concerning updated training. This past winter, I have run a series of writing workshops for the tutors. The "update" training workshops last one hour and do not have to be attended. Consequently, attendance is low and therefore ongoing training for the tutors in minimized. As the presenter at these workshops, I found it frustrating to give what was suppose to be a series of workshops, that were not necessarily attended by the same people.

In the first workshop, semantic webbing was discussed and how it can be used to organize writing during the prewriting skills. Using the overhead, an explanation was given and then modeled. The tutors were then given the opportunity to use semantic webbing to organize ideas during the prewriting stage. In the newsletter that the director

sends out, she had included some writing lessons that she had used in a previous training. This was incorporated into the presentation and graphic organizers that could have been used during the prewriting stage were introduced and explained.

During this workshop, it was emphasized that initially this needed to be modeled and that the student needed to be lead through the procedure. It was suggested that the tutor make sure the spelling was correct on the web. A week later, in a discussion with one of the tutors, it was remarked that she was not sure how the writing was progressing since she had sent the unfinished web home with the learner to complete.

The next workshop was scheduled two months later, but since this ran into the Christmas season, it was postponed until January. The plan for this workshop was to slightly review semantic webs, give a short lesson on how to foster the use of descriptive words by describing a concrete object and then to discuss conferencing skills. This workshop had only 3 tutors that had attended the previous workshop and 11 that had not, so the initial plan had to be quickly revised and not much time was spent on conferencing.

The last workshop was in March centered on conferencing techniques, evaluating writing to improve the revision, a checklist for learners to use for self editing and finally a whole language profile chart to keep a record of student progress. This writing profile chart, along with a reading

chart was devised by a Geri Gillin, a doctoral student at the University of Lowell (This chart is under review to be published in the Journal of Reading). It was explained that this portfolio profile, if used correctly would help the tutors to chart and therefore visualize the growth of their learners. As mentioned previously, the slow progress of the learner is often an area of frustration to the tutor. The assessment checklist was extremely well received, the tutors planned to use it immediately and the director decided to include it in the next training session. Through the evening's discussion, the decisions was made that the tutors would share this profile chart with their learner, so that together they could visually see the academic growth of the learner.

Although there are numerous solutions to the problems mentioned in this program and others like it, none of the solutions are easy. The most obvious problem is lack of funding and therefore lack of support staff to ensure the success of these programs. With increased staff a larger effort could be made to recruit volunteers. Some ideas used for recruitment in other programs have been to send request flyers home in bank mailings and to put request flyers in bags at the grocery store. One suggestion given to the TLC was to put request for tutor information in the municipal lighing plant monthly billing.

An increase in staff could also help to solve the feeling of isolation felt by many tutors. The literacy

program in Belleville, Illinois, (which was funded with $70,000) uses "coffee hours" in local restaurants to meet with tutors to discuss problems and to update training.

An increase in staff could also enable the volunteer program to decrease the waiting list by (1) increasing the number of volunteers and (2) decreasing the frustration of the existing volunteers and hopefully retaining them in their position for a longer period of time.

In conclusion, working with TLC has been a rewarding an enjoyable experience. In this particular program the director does not have her degree in reading, but in linquistics, and she welcomes any expertise and support that is offered. The director has incorporated many of the ideas from the workshops into her training sessions and requested that tutors come in for a "refresher course" since much of the training had changed.

Personally, I find it very rewarding to voluntarily teach the workshops for the Taunton Literacy Corps. Next year, to solve my own problems in teaching the workshops, independent topics will be discussed and the series format dropped. It could be possible that a series of workshops discourages tutor's attendance since it is a continous training commitment and not a singular event. Another solution will be to try to run the workshops during daylight hours, since many of the tutors are retired and may prefer to drive in the day.

In its mission to promote literacy in the year 2000, the IRA's Adult Literacy Committee is encouraging association members to serve as effective literacy resource persons within their communities. I would like to do the same. For the small amount of time I have given the Taunton Literacy Corps, I have gained greater insight into the adult literacy issue and have found that it is most certainly an area in which reading experts are needed.